

## **Taking Aim at Diploma Mills, Education Department Creates Online List of Accredited Colleges**

By Dan Carnevale

*Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 2, 2005

Washington - The Department of Education unveiled a Web site <<http://www.ope.ed.gov/accreditation/>> on Tuesday that federal officials hope will be a reliable tool for helping students avoid online diploma mills. The site provides a searchable list of institutions accredited by federally approved organizations.

Members of Congress asked the department to create the list last year, after they found out that some federal employees were trying to pass off certifications from suspected diploma mills as legitimate degrees. The lawmakers say the list is a "first step" in a more aggressive fight against fraudulent institutions -- a fight that they say could include legislation to outlaw the way some diploma mills operate.

The list is made up of about 6,900 institutions that take part in the federal student-aid programs, which require participating colleges to be accredited by an agency recognized by the Education Department. Just because an institution is not on the list, though, does not mean that it is a diploma mill.

Sally Stroup, the Education Department's chief policy maker for higher education, said at a news conference on Tuesday that some legitimate institutions, such as foreign universities and some religious colleges, do not participate in the federal financial-aid program. If a college is not listed, she said, students should investigate the institution further before sending a tuition check.

The Web site allows users to search by a variety of criteria, including college name, accrediting agency, state, and type of institution. The list was compiled using the information institutions provide when reporting data required for participation in the federal aid programs. "We had it at our fingertips, but we weren't using it the way we should," Ms. Stroup said of the data.

Eventually the list will be updated, Ms. Stroup said, to include institutions that were accredited but for one reason or another lost accreditation. That way, if someone graduated from an institution while it was accredited, the person would still be able to put that information on a résumé without drawing suspicion.

Ms. Stroup said she did not know how long it would take to add such historical data. It may be difficult to compile the information, she said, as some institutions gain and lose accreditation numerous times.

Members of Congress attended the news conference to pledge further action against diploma mills. Rep. Michael N. Castle, a Delaware Republican, said Congress would be looking to change federal laws to close "loopholes" that

allow diploma mills to exist, although he did not provide specifics. Speaking at the news conference with Ms. Stroup, he said it would not be easy to draw hard and fast lines because the differences between legitimate and fraudulent institutions are in some cases minute.

"It's not quite as black and white as we would like it," said Mr. Castle, who is chairman of an education-reform subcommittee of the House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce. "There's no easy fix to this."

Rep. Howard P. (Buck) McKeon, a California Republican and chairman of the education committee, said diploma mills prey on uninformed consumers who are looking for the easiest way to get an undergraduate or graduate degree. Some of the diploma mills advertise that students can receive their degrees in two weeks.

"I wonder, if you can get a degree in two weeks and you work hard for four years, who really is the smart one?" joked Mr. McKeon. "It's tempting, you know. I don't have a Ph.D."

Also on Tuesday, the Office of Personnel Management and the Federal Trade Commission issued guidelines clarifying federal policy on unaccredited degrees and offering tips on spotting suspicious institutions. The trade commission's report, "Avoid Fake-Degree Burns by Researching Academic Credentials," <<http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2005/02/diplomamills.htm>> is available on its Web site.

And Ms. Stroup recommended that people visit the Web site <<http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/>> of the Oregon Student Assistance Commission Office of Degree Authorization, which has compiled a list of about 200 suspected diploma mills. Oregon outlaws the use of degrees from institutions that are not accredited or recognized by the state as legitimate.

But officials at some institutions that are listed on Oregon's Web site say they are unfairly characterized as possible diploma mills. One institution, Kennedy-Western University, even filed a lawsuit against the State of Oregon on First Amendment grounds (The Chronicle, <[daily/2004/08/2004081001n.htm](http://www.thechronicle.com/daily/2004/08/2004081001n.htm)> August 10, 2004). The lawsuit was settled in December. No money was exchanged, but Kennedy-Western students are no longer barred from including their degrees on their résumés in Oregon. And Kennedy-Western has agreed to inform students that the institution's degrees are not recognized in that state.

Mr. Castle said at the news conference that many distance-education institutions are perfectly legitimate, but that it is not always obvious which ones are and which ones are not. Part of the problem is that the growth of the Internet has made it easier for fraudulent organizations to set up shop online and easier to avoid accountability. "All of this has been a heck of a lot simpler with the use of the Internet," Mr. Castle said. But he added: "The tracking of them and the prosecution of them is a heck of

a lot harder."